

Heritage Language Instruction and Giftedness in Language Minority Students: Pathways Toward Success

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Language minority students, while often underrepresented in traditional gifted programs, can benefit from “heritage language” courses focused on developing academic proficiency and exploring challenging content in their home language. We describe how heritage language courses can provide an appropriate venue for the identification of gifted potential among language minority students, how such courses can enhance student motivation for learning, and what cognitive benefits may be associated with additive bilingualism developed through such courses.

Students whose first, home, or dominant language is other than English are a rapidly growing segment of the school-aged population in many parts of the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). All too frequently, well-meaning teachers and administrators are left feeling frustrated and unsure of the appropriateness of their usual models of teaching, testing, and placement when working with these students. Such concerns are especially salient with regard to giftedness. Partly due to differences in language and culture between students and staff, giftedness among language minority students often remains unidentified and undeveloped, leading to widespread underrepresentation of these students in programs for high-achieving and gifted students (Artiles & Zamora-Durán, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). For instance, Hispanic/Latino students (currently the largest language minority group in many parts of the U.S.) are less than half as likely as White students to be placed in gifted and talented programs across the country (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Despite these inequalities, there is no valid basis for assuming that high academic potential is less prevalent

among language minority students than among the mainstream population. It seems more likely that cultural and linguistic factors are primarily responsible for the observed differences in gifted program identification and participation rates (Ford & Harmon, 2001; Valdés, 1998; Valdés & Figueroa, 1994).

At many schools serving language minority students, then, there is likely to be a substantial cadre of such students who have outstanding potential, but who are not being recognized or stimulated academically. While researchers (e.g., Castellano, 2002a; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Frasier, 1994; Matthews, 2002a) have begun to suggest valuable ways to modify gifted identification procedures and instruments, and educators are becoming more sensitized to these issues, we suggest here a curricular approach: the incorporation of “heritage language” courses into the secondary program of study. Such classes would postpone the conundrum of selecting appropriate identification processes by being available to all students sharing a common linguistic background, and they would allow language minority students a venue for both demonstrating and cultivating linguistic giftedness.

Foreign Language Classes and Language Minority Students

Language minority students often face a quandary at the high school level, where foreign language courses are recommended or required within the college-preparatory curriculum. Despite their knowledge of their first or home language, when placed in traditional courses (i.e., courses offering an additional language to monolingual “mainstream” children), language minority students frequently flounder and may even be marginalized by their language background (Peyton, Lewelling, & Winke, 2001; Reagan & Osborn, 2002). In many instances, these students already have achieved oral “communicative competence,” a primary goal of many traditional language programs (e.g., Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Omaggio Hadley, 1993), and quickly become bored by pronunciation work, beginning level dialogues, pattern-repetition drills, and similar exercises.

Taking second- or third-year courses in the language is not necessarily appropriate either, given that these students commonly “have little or no formal education in [the heritage language] and little or no ability to read or write it” (Campbell & Peyton, 1998, p. 1). Additionally, they may speak a nonstandard dialect of the language (Campbell & Peyton; Villa, 1996), resulting in poor performance on typical written or oral foreign language tests. Rather than providing an opportunity for students to improve their language skills, then, traditional foreign language courses may inadvertently lead to low achievement and concomitant feelings of frustration for both teachers and their students. As Ford and Harmon (2001) have pointed out, “underachievement is learned . . . [and is often] not due to lack of intelligence, but due to lack of opportunity” (p. 144).

Fortunately, a growing number of high schools around the country now offer heritage language classes (e.g., Campbell & Peyton, 1998; Ingold, Rivers, Tesser, & Ashby, 2002; Peyton et al., 2001), which have great potential for improving the education of language minority students. Heritage language courses are “foreign language” classes designed for students for whom the language is not foreign—those who are at least partially orally proficient in their family’s heritage language. Such classes generally use different materials and have different foci than traditional foreign language courses. For instance, rather than targeting oral proficiency, they may provide focused instruction in reading, writing, and standard grammar and vocabulary and they often involve in-depth study of culture, literature, and history of the language group.

Heritage Language Classes and the Gifted Learner

While heritage language classes are not necessarily restricted to language minority students identified as gifted or high

achieving, they nonetheless have many characteristics that are in alignment with standards for appropriate curricula for the gifted. Specifically, heritage classes embody the flexibility and responsiveness to individual student needs that is a key assumption within both curricula for the gifted (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2002; VanTassel-Baska, 1994) and curricula for linguistically diverse students (Rivera & Zehler, 1991). Here, we focus especially on three ways in which heritage language classes can promote success for gifted language minority students:

1. **Identification:** In heritage language courses, students may demonstrate their academic potential with minimal interference from possible nonnative fluency in English.
2. **Motivation:** The inclusive nature of the heritage language curriculum, its validation of students’ home cultures, and the role models to whom students are exposed can motivate and empower language minority students in ways that have the potential to influence positively their overall academic performance.
3. **Achievement gains due to bilingualism:** Promotion of the home language may lead to higher achievement in other courses as a consequence of the development of bilingual ability.

Gifted Identification and Heritage Language Classes

Regardless of whether giftedness is conceptualized within a framework of creativity, achievement, or potential for high performance, only a small number of heritage language students will be gifted. However, as many educators have recognized, there is a need for improving the education of students who possess these talents (Artiles & Zamora-Durán, 1997; U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In many schools, the teachers and staff who make gifted referrals are not themselves bilingual or bicultural and therefore may find it more difficult to judge bilingual students’ potential (Kogan, 2001; Plata & Marsten, 1998). Likewise, language minority students grouped in classes with native English speakers may also be overlooked (cf. Ford & Harmon, 2001).

Heritage language classes offer several ways to counteract these difficulties. First, teachers in heritage language programs are often themselves bilingual, bicultural, or both. While research on student placement has not definitively established the role of teacher ethnicity in making effective judgments, this similarity may minimize inadvertent selection bias. For instance, because culturally similar teachers may be more aware of culturally specific manifestations of giftedness (Kitano & Espinosa, 1995; Passow & Frasier, 1996), they may be more likely than mainstream teachers to notice manifestations of giftedness among their nonmainstream students.

Second, since by design students in heritage language courses are characterized by increased homogeneity of ethnic and linguistic background, such classes offer a built-in local comparison group within which gifted behaviors will be more highly visible. Classes such as these should minimize issues of differential teacher perceptions of, and interactions with, students who are from linguistic minority backgrounds (e.g., Crago, Eriks-Brophy, Pesco, & McAlpine, 1997; Losey, 1995).

Third, since heritage language courses are not conducted in English, they provide an excellent venue for observing student achievement, creativity, and potential in contexts not constrained by the medium of "English only." As Castellano (2002b) has observed, the use of the heritage language for instruction "allow[s] for its continued development, with particular emphasis on improving reading and writing, while at the same time encouraging the student behaviors of risk-taking, elaboration, and complexity" (p. 125). Thus, when language minority students with unrecognized talents take part in heritage language classes, they have a more level playing field on which to display their academic gifts and potential.

Student Motivation and Heritage Language Classes

Gifted language minority students may often appear unmotivated or disengaged, despite their academic potential (Ford & Harmon, 2001). As many authorities have suggested, coursework that is more "culturally responsive" to the lived experiences and backgrounds of minority students (e.g., Gay, 2000) may provide one way of increasing the engagement of all students, including gifted underachievers (Granada, 2002). In the heritage language context, classes such as Spanish for Native Speakers, for example, frequently include among their goals the study of the cultures and literature of Spanish-speaking countries, as well as discussions of Latino identities (Carreira, 2000; Valdés, 1997). Heritage language classes are ideally suited to developing the student pride, self-awareness, and creative ability identified as a key component of appropriate curricula for gifted students (e.g., Tomlinson et al., 2002).

Teachers' acknowledgement of, and positive regard toward, cultural differences is intrinsically motivating for many language minority students and can result in greater engagement with school and learning (Burnette, 1999). Heritage language classes are an optimal setting for such a focus (Carreira, 2000). For example, in a study of heritage language learners of Japanese in Hawaii, Kondo-Brown (2001) determined that students found studying the heritage language "challenging, interesting, and important" (p. 451) and that student interest in the heritage language and culture tended to increase with time (p. 448). Similarly, language minority students in Canada

who participated in heritage language programs demonstrated increased affective and cognitive development, more positive attitudes about themselves and their ethnic background, and better integration into schools (Cummins, 1992).

Finally, access to bilingual/bicultural role models can also be an important motivator because teacher-student relations are among the most critical elements leading to success for language minority students (Burnette, 1999; Dörnyei, 2001). In schools in many parts of the U.S., for example, the only "Latino" teacher may be the Spanish teacher. Heritage language programs can provide direct student access to culturally similar teachers, who can demonstrate and model the importance of academic achievement and provide affective support and encouragement (Dörnyei; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Though motivational research on general academic self-concept (not just domain-specific efficacy) has not yet brought definitive results (e.g., Pintrich & Schunk, 1996), some motivational gains from participating in a heritage language class may also translate into increased academic engagement in other curricular areas.

Achievement Gains and Heritage Language Classes

By fostering connections between school, home, and community through culturally relevant curricula, heritage language courses can provide an excellent venue for developing the intracultural social networks that have been shown to promote achievement among language minority students (Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, however, heritage language courses may directly impact student achievement through their bilingual context. Research makes clear that language minority students whose education is carried out at least partly in their first language (L1) outperform similar students whose education is conducted entirely in English (Thomas & Collier, 1997, 2002). Thus, an important element of educational success for language minority students of all ability levels is access to schooling in their first language.

Provision of such access is a highly contentious issue; see, for instance, the English for the Children Web site (n.d.), Krashen (1997), or the recent issue of *Bilingual Research Journal* (García, 2000) dedicated to California's Proposition 227. In many locations, instruction has been mandated (whether by the legislature, the state Board of Education, or voter referendum) to be "English only." Heritage language classes, in which students' home language is the medium of instruction, may provide in these locales the only permissible venue for non-English educational programming. Heritage language classes by definition encourage the development of additive bilingualism, in which the first language is fostered alongside

English, rather than being replaced by it. Interestingly, the development of additive bilingualism may enhance students' academic prowess in other areas.

We know that developed literacy skills in a student's first language have a significant and positive impact on his or her development of literacy in English (Brisk & Harrington, 2000; Cummins, 1991; Krashen, 1997). For example, "the deeper a student's level of L1 cognitive and academic development (which includes L1 proficiency development), the faster students will progress in L2" (Thomas & Collier, 1997, p. 36). This is especially important for immigrant or migrant students who enter U.S. schools having had limited formal schooling. When language minority students focus on reading and writing in their heritage language, they gain literacy strategies and tacit knowledge (Wagner & Sternberg, 1986) that add to their reading and writing skills in English, with concomitant benefit to their academic performance in other fields (Peyton et al., 2001).

We also know that students who are additively bilingual can often transfer their metalinguistic awareness, language learning strategies, and language knowledge to learn third or additional languages. Teachers, parents, and students in heritage language classes have noted the increased facility these students feel in learning additional foreign languages (e.g., Cummins, 1992). Speed and ease of language acquisition, in fact, has long been recognized as a preeminent characteristic of gifted bilingual students (Bernal & Reyna, 1974).

Additionally, however, bilingual language minority students have abilities that extend beyond the linguistic domain, possibly involving a more general cognitive flexibility (e.g., Hakuta & Gould, 1987). For instance, there appears to be a "bilingual advantage" across both linguistic and nonlinguistic tasks that involve making sense of and organizing potentially anomalous or distracting sets of data (e.g., Bialystok, 1999). Several decades of research on bilingualism (Bialystok, 1999, 2001; Cummins, 1976; Hakuta, 1987; Hakuta & Gould, 1987; Peal & Lambert, 1962) have demonstrated that bilingual children (especially at younger ages) consistently outperform their monolingual counterparts on certain kinds of tasks.

The nature of the postulated cognitive benefits of bilingualism remains under investigation (e.g., Matthews 2002b). Nevertheless, schools and teachers should be aware that bilingual students' abilities do represent a kind of giftedness (Valdés, 2003), and they must realize that bilingualism is more than the sum of students' first and second language abilities considered separately (Brisk & Harrington, 2000). Heritage language courses that promote additive bilingualism can thus serve as an example of the emerging gifted education paradigm referred to as "talent development" or "talent education," focusing on the development of particular student abilities (Gagné, 1995; Plucker, 2002; Treffinger, 1998). Plucker, for example, has con-

ceptualized ability within the context of individual-environment relationships and has argued that this perspective could allow more individuals the opportunity to be seen as talented via their manifestation of particular skills. This, in turn, reinforces the likelihood of appropriate identification of giftedness, as discussed above.

Challenges and Possibilities

Heritage language classes, despite their promise, are not viable for all language minority students. Factors such as teacher and scheduling availability, for instance, as well as the number of students from a particular background within a particular school may limit the number of heritage language classes that can be offered. Still, in many parts of the U.S., heritage language programs in Spanish likely have special promise. The heterogeneous population referred to as Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001), most of whom speak some variety of Spanish, is the largest and fastest growing language minority group in the United States, yet it is one of the least frequently served groups in gifted and talented programs (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Fortunately, in most school systems, Spanish is also the most commonly taught foreign language, accounting for about 70% of grade 7–12 foreign language enrollment nationally (Draper & Hicks, 2002), so the pool of qualified teachers is relatively large. This alignment of needs and resources should thus allow for successful scheduling of heritage Spanish classes in many schools. Likewise, in areas with high concentrations of other language groups (e.g., Japanese in Hawaii; Kondo-Brown, 2001), schools may have both sufficient demand and sufficient teacher expertise to provide for heritage language classes. Resources for teaching such classes are also becoming more readily available (Campbell & Peyton, 1998; Peyton et al., 2001). Given their tremendous potential, we believe that heritage language programs should be strongly supported by teachers and administrators interested in motivating language minority students and helping them to develop their linguistic and cognitive talents more fully.

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